



## Vojvodina - A Hidden Ace for Serbia on the Road of Approaching the EU

by Jelko Kacin<sup>1</sup>

At the end of January this year my colleagues and me participated in a working program of a special five-member delegation of the European Parliament that visited Vojvodina and Belgrade in order to examine the facts about a presumed pressure on the minorities in the light of several violent acts, about which the European public was informed. The program was full of all kinds of meetings and has truly enabled us to see, experience and feel the mosaic of impressions, which allow us to make an evaluation of the true situation. Within the delegation we were a German lady, an Austrian, two Hungarians and a Slovenian, while in political terms we belonged to the group of People's parties EPP (2), the Socialists – PSE (2) and the Liberals – ALDE/ADLE. We were also accompanied by a large team of a professional staff of the Secretariat of the Permanent Delegation of EP for the Relations with the Countries of SE Europe and »professionals«, who are in the present political groups dealing with the foreign politics. As it can be seen, I was the only one from the area of former Yugoslavia, which presented itself as a burden of a kind, even though a great advantage and a challenge as well.

Through a longer period of time appeared several and repeated news of increased interethnic disagreements and outbursts of violence, in which the perpetrators and the victims belonged to different nations. A number of such events increased especially before and at the time of provincial-local elections in the autumn of 2004. All this has brought to generalized estimations that we are seeing an increased violence, forms of pressure and a need for the action of international community as soon as possible. In the working plan of the EP it is hard to find free time, and it is even harder to organize the visits by content in such a way that the delegation can meet so many different people to talk to and views on both sides of the medal. The delegation will prepare a complete report and me; I have already informed my political group by writing about my observations and therefore this writing in no way represents an evaluation of the visit, not in the name of the EP, the delegation and me personally. With this writing I simply wish to warn of certain elements, which are, when the conversation brings on Vojvodina, not present enough in our conscience.

A decade of Yugoslav wars has brutally intervened with the events and conditions of life and work in Vojvodina. The members of the minorities are all convinced that by performing mobilization of the reserve army in the region, the authorities chose selectively and recruited over proportionally large share of military recruits among the minority members. There were operations in Slavonia and those around Vukovar that have according to the minority members shown the absurdity and lack of sense in the ethnical cleansing, in which actively and in great measure participated the minority members of Vojvodina. In order to avoid the draft, army recruits massively went to study abroad, especially to Hungary, while at the end of the study it didn't even occur to them to return to the province. The brain drain has terribly hurt especially the Hungarian minority, since the number of young people that left the province runs into hundreds of thousands. Due to the unenviable economic conditions, high unemployment rate and acute lack of foreign investment, the economic perspective of the province is unenviable, there are still no realistic forecasts for a noticeable condition improvement and therefore a great part of these emigrants is in all probability for the province and its future for ever lost. The demographic trends in the province are expressively negative; the fertility in the province was the lowest already in the times of the former common country and now the conditions are even much worse. Those who remained are predominately representing older generations and children on lower levels of schooling.

<sup>1</sup> MEP, A Member of the European Parliament (ALDE/ADLE) and a member of the Committee for Foreign Affairs of the EP

Into the province many refugees moved from Bosnia and Croatia, a fact that has dramatically changed the ethnical structure of the province's population, which was through the history again and again, every few decades, exposed to new and new waves of refugees or colonizers. The province wasn't spared this time as well, only that this time the farming does not represent any more the saving branch of the economy, which has so many times in the past in relatively short time ensured a decent well-being to the autochthonous and the newly arrived population of Vojvodina. Even though everybody in line is repeating and ensuring, that the recently arrived Serbian population was used to live in a multicultural, multireligious and multinational environment, the conditions this time are for the newly arrived different after all. Up to this time they lived in a multi-Slavic environment, where belonging to different religions divided indeed, but the variety of language was definitely smaller and the level of understanding each other and communicating with each other in linguistical sense was more than excellent. This time, the newcomers are facing other, also non-Slavic languages, which demands learning of the minority languages from the beginning, for which there is no real will among the newcomers. Hungarian and Romanian language are more than demanding and represent also a challenge in terms of culture and values. We have heard and examined quite a few examples, when as a cause for physical attack the language use should be sufficient, when most of them don't even know the language or don't understand it enough.

Several times the ways of vandalism in the environment were in general and without any difference condemned, they caused feelings of disgust and outrage among all the groups of population, while the explanations of the police were insufficient, sometimes not convincing enough, and here and there also consciously used as means of manipulation and even incitement towards mistrusting the investigation agencies. Especially in cases of desecrating the graveyards and graves, what was supposedly being done by adolescents of both genders under the influence of alcohol or drugs, the public response was skeptical and has caused additional mistrust. A demand for an efficient running of investigation and legal procedures is still one of the preconditions for calming the atmosphere and establishment of trust among people. The level of drug distribution among the young people is extremely high and the absence of better social and economic conditions is still remaining one of potentially very acute hot points of interethnic tensions.

Among the members of the Hungarian people the problem of concealed burial grounds from the period after the liberation is still present, when the military courts convicted due to the collaboration with the occupiers, Hungarian and German alike, thousands of people, who were afterwards executed. Places of executions and killings are still not available to the families, the burial grounds are not marked and the subject is still remaining a taboo. And here we are not discussing the events of the spring 1945, but rather the events of late autumn 1944. If we recall, how far have we reached in Slovenia on this issue, and we still have problems, then we have to be aware what a great burden this part of history represents for the Hungarian minority as well the Serbian majority. Let me recall, that Hungary was as the immediate neighbor in times of NATO attacks on Yugoslavia already a member of the alliance, a fact that is even further aggravating and complicating the attitude of the majority towards the Hungarians in Vojvodina.

Inclusion (read employment) of Serbian refugees into the systems of police and justice is in the eyes of the minorities raising additional concern that they will not be treated as equals whereas in the stages of pre-penal and penal procedure every mistake is often tried to be presented as an intended harassment and discrimination against the members of the minority nations. The examination of individual cases has shown that this was not the case, while a strong opposite opinion still exists among the people.

The members of the minorities are finding out that their educational system fell asleep and stayed behind and did not follow the development in Europe and is therefore today not suitable for the enlarged needs and larger and higher demands that are brought by the EU expansion and the free flow of people, goods and ideas. About this, many can only dream, while those with the Hungarian passport (EU) can also apply in practice. The central authorities in Belgrade themselves don't have enough knowledge about the numerable changes, which have occurred in Europe in the last fifteen years and therefore even they themselves do not understand well the expectations, aspirations and needs of the minorities, since they have been consciously performing the acts of isolation only for too long. The understandings about the quality of the educational system for the minorities are in great measure valid also for the educational system of the majority population. The improvement of conditions and the quality of education is one of the preconditions for the improvement of the situation not only in Vojvodina, but also in Serbia.

Completely on the edges of the events remains the Romany population, especially those who arrived from Kosovo as refugees. Their conditions of survival remain appalling, there is practically no socialization and the forms of assistance are rare and temporary and in great measure most of all inefficient. The so-called »Ashkali« belong to the category that is also in Vojvodina completely marginalized and overlooked.

In many local communities, including the capital city of the province, Novi Sad, the radicals won. The election results were many times and for many people a base for conclusions and estimations that the radicalization of the situation, which was supported by different political parties, including the minority ones, and especially searching for political backgrounds at any price with all, even the smallest »incidents«, paid off, since it carried results. Political changes occurred and the minority parties mostly became extra-parliamentary parties, while on the local level they are (were) literally forced into some form of cooperation with the radicals. Vojvodina has changed and in many senses radicalized. The problems and the challenges seem many times bigger than they are in reality, while political blockades and embarrassments occur more often. In the shadow of searching for a solution for Kosovo the excitement, of the majority as well as of the minorities, is manifesting itself also in searching for international support and assistance in the light of internationalization of the situation in Vojvodina.

Vojvodina could, in searching for the urgently needed consensus for the necessary European political way, the way of changes and transatlantic connections, play for Serbia a very active, pioneering and convincing role at home as well as abroad. More political power, more authority for the provincial organs could lead towards a successful and a more European daily practice in the province, whose example could be more easily and quickly taken in Belgrade and also elsewhere in Serbia. Over the border cooperation with regions in Hungary and later on also in Romania and Croatia, could also enable acquisition of urgently needed knowledge and European means for an accelerated development of Vojvodina and Serbia.

Vojvodina was and still is little Europe, a province with six official languages and a true environment that can greatly contribute to different practice and image in Serbia. It is a question of self-image of the Serbs, of image of the EU in the eyes of the Serbs but also of the image of Serbs and Serbia in the eyes of the institutions and citizens of Europe. Time is for Vojvodina in most noble and most multi-layered meaning of all the contents of this term. With one word: now it's time for Vojvodina.